GRAND OPERA HOUSE

DELAWARE'S CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS & BI-CENTENNIAL MEETING HOUSE
BUILT BY THE MASONS IN 1871

May 1, 1976

MAX MORATH
The Ragtime Years
May 1, 1976

Preview concert in honor of
Construction Personnel

Max Morath

If there is any validity to the theory of prenatal influence, then Max Morath was born – in Colorado Springs, Colorado – with a predilection for the piano and popular music. His mother, later a professional newspaper woman, played piano accompaniments for silent movies during the '20's. Though Max studied piano and composition formally, it was from his mother he learned to play the ragtime style, a skill which helped him work his way through college as an announcer, newscaster and pianist for a CBS radio station, KVOR. He received his B.A. degree in English from Colorado College in 1948.

After his graduation, he worked as a staff announcer for radio station KGHF in Pueblo, Colorado, later becoming an actor, pianist, singer and musical director for stock companies in Phoenix, Dallas and other western cities. He studied at the NBC Radio and Television Institute at Stanford University and, applying what he learned, became production manager at television station KKTV in the latter part of 1952.

Beginning in 1954, Morath spent six summers as music director and pianist for the Imperial Players in the colorful mining camp of Cripple Creek, Colorado. During this period, he began to specialize in ragtime and turn-of-the-century styles and repertoire. Becoming a student of the social history of the United States from 1890 to 1920, Morath embarked particularly on research in the musical history of the era. He combed libraries, studied ragtime piano rolls, borrowed old sheet music, consulted historical societies, explored antique shops, rummaged through old magazines and interviewed survivors of the ragtime era. The result was a completely original act: the showmanship of a modern entertainer combined with the repertoire of vaudeville performer, knit together with humorous and penetrating commentaries on the music, mores and social etiquette of a vanished America.

It was in the fall of 1960 that Morath first gained national attention. He wrote and performed a series for National Educational Television (NET) called "The Ragtime Era", tracing the development of ragtime, the beginnings of musical comedy and the rise of Tin Pan Alley. The success of this series led to many bookings for Morath at concerts and night clubs. It also led to a second and more ambitious NET series in which Morath presented social history of the era as reflected in its entertainment arts.

Now established in a unique show-business career, Morath went on to his New York night club debut at the famed Blue Angel in 1963, and in 1964 premiered his versatile Original Rag Quartet at New York's historic Village Vanguard. With the quartet he deepened his research into the folk roots of popular music and toured widely in colleges and as a featured act with Dinah Shore in Las Vegas and elsewhere. It was during these years, while appearing at clubs and college theatres from coast to coast, that Morath developed the format for a unique one-man theatrical, "Max Morath at the Turn of the Century", which he opened in New York in February of 1969. Critical acclaim was unanimous and he played New York for eighteen weeks before launching a national tour at the Stanford University Summer Festival, followed by engagements at beautiful Fords' Theatre in Washington, D.C., American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, and dozens of professional, college and community theaters all over America.

Max Morath's current schedule includes continued performing on tour for theatre, concert, college and lecture audiences. All along, his championing of the classic ragtime of Scott Joplin and other early musicians has contributed to a national re-discovery of this vital American music and the era that produced it.

Always active in radio and television, he is a frequent guest on the major TV variety and talk shows, and is currently writing and co-producing Americana broadcasting properties for syndication. Morath a Vanguard recording artist, has compiled and edited several collections of popular music, and is active as a writer and composer.

He maintains a studio and office in New York, and lives in suburban Bergen County, New Jersey, with his wife and three children.

MAX MORATH – THE RAGTIME YEARS

PROGRAM

ACT I

A NEW MUSIC FOR A NEW CENTURY

Everybody's Doin' It!
Shocking, these new dances the young people are doing.
"Ragtime's everywhere, ragtime's rife!"

EVERYTHING'S CHANGING

But people are staying the same.
"It's a bear! It's a bear!"
Household words for Household goods.

THE RAGTIME CONTINUUM

What Every Girl Should Know, by May Irwin
"A lassie who ventured on life's stormy path – ill-advised. . . . ."
City lights and country boys
The View from the Time Machine

THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE EXPOSITION, ST. LOUIS, 1903-04

Ragtime Mecca and Performer's Paradise
"Everything in the line of hilarity."
Scott Joplin (The Current Sensation)
George M. Cohan – Still just a kid, but . . . . .
Edison and Morath
"And here they are, folks!"

HALF OVER

ACT II

EVERYTHING BEGINS

"The past is a great place to visit, but who'd want to live there?
"Be sure to rub on plenty of Nostalgia!"

(Some old songs are new songs.)

THE RAGTIME CONTINUUM: PART II

"These rags will add materially to the gaiety of nations."

A GREAT FLOWERING OF PRIVATE ENTERPRISE

The buyer's guide to booze and other palliatives
The basement
The drugstore
The underworld

THE RAGTIME YEARS

Search, discovery, loss
Music? In the air?

"Let the joy come through."

GOOD NIGHT

Ragtime Rediscovery

By Max Morath

Scott Joplin has made the big time again. Seventy-five years after the publication of his monster hit, "Maple Leaf Rag", the ultimate accolade of modern music business has been laid on. In a New York restaurant the other day, I heard his beautiful rag "The Entertainer" on Muzak! It was the usual Muzak treatment, of course – insisting only that I needn't really listen. It was sandwiched neatly between a Burt Bacharach and a vintage Gershwin; all three sounded the same, of course, but who cared? Scott Joplin had arrived!

And he hit the record charts. "The Entertainer" climbed to Number One of the Top Forty singles, and the LP of the sound track of "The Sting" also made it to Number One and remained there for months. The soundtrack of "The Sting" won an Oscar. Scott Joplin is a hit.

The fact that these various versions reflect very little of Joplin's musical intentions in "The Entertainer" is a quibble. A hit is a hit. Many music lovers, after all, failed to get the Beatles' message until they heard the Boston Pops' arrangement of "Yesterday". Never mind that the message didn't survive the translation.

All this had led people to note that there is a ragtime revival. I see it more as a Scott Joplin revival. Joplin's music has been rediscovered and I believe will stay alive. He'll survive Muzak and the Top Forty. His music has enough hypnotic purity and simplicity to withstand the decorators and the embellishers, the subtracters and the adders.

Ragtime entered the music scene in the 1890's, and like any major upheaval, it was the beat in ragtime that was revolutionary. A regular syncopated right hand played against a steady, even-accented bass might be the simplest way to define ragtime musically. However, ragtime is many sounds; slow or razzamatazz, soft or loud, irritating or pretty. No one really knows where the name comes from. (Many say it's a slurring of "ragged-time.") Ragtime was an amalgam of almost all the musical influences in the world coming together in America at the turn of the century in the Mississippi Valley. The turn of the century was also the time of inventions, one of them being Edison's phonograph, and it also marked the beginning of vaudeville, both things necessary to get the music to the people and thereby to create the first American pop music. – ragtime.

Scott Joplin was born in 1868. He left home in his early teens and travelled through the Mississippi Valley playing the honky-tonks, tent shows and sporting districts. Joplin was not a lonely genius working in a garret. He was a man of his time, a trained, sophisticated musician who published his work and was well known by the public and his peers. In fact, his 1899 composition "Maple Leaf Rag" is possibly the biggest single hit of all time.

Although Joplin was an acknowledged leader of ragtime in his own time, and now once again, he was one of many thousands of players and composers of ragtime, many of them extremely talented, some of the geniuses. There was James Scott from Kansas City, Arthur Marshall (one of Joplin's Missouri pals), Tom Turpin, Nashville ragman Charles Hunter, Joe Lamb (probably Joplin's most important protege), Luckey Roberts, Jim Europe, and Eubie Blake, the 93 year-old black man who's still alive and ragging (I hope you live forever, Eubie). Ragtime has been rediscovered; it is getting belated recognition as a fine music, which it richly deserves.

As we enter the bi-centennial period, it seems proper to look into our own past. We have been reluctant to look to ourselves but instead have turned primarily to Europe to define our heritage artistically. However, the reemergence of ragtime should remind us that even more of the American heritage remains to be tapped, not only musically and artistically, but historically and philosophically as well.